



---

## **PRESS RELEASE**

---

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE  
JULY 17, 2003**

For Information Contact Public Affairs  
**HARRIET BERNICK**  
Telephone: (602) 514-7736  
Pager: (602) 356-0004

# **FEDERAL DRUG TASK FORCE BREAKS UP MULTI-TON MARIJUANA TRANSPORTATION ORGANIZATION**

**PHOENIX, ARIZONA** -- The United States Attorney's Office for the District of Arizona announced that on July 17, 2003, the federal Organized Crime and Drug Enforcement Task Force (OCDETF), arrested members of a Sierra Vista/Hereford-based marijuana transportation group responsible for transporting nearly 50 tons of marijuana to Tucson, Casa Grande and Phoenix.

On July 9, 2003, a federal grand jury in Tucson, Arizona, returned a 22 count indictment against 22 defendants involved in a Sierra Vista-based marijuana transportation group. The indictment alleges that from the summer of 1999 to July 2001, the group used rental cars, U-Haul trucks, Penske trucks, Ryder trucks, Bed Mart delivery trucks, Sam Levitz trucks and dump trucks to transport nearly 50 tons of marijuana from the Hereford/Sierra Vista area, to Tucson, Casa Grande and Phoenix, Arizona. Those indicted include Ruben Dareo Arce, DOB 2/5/71, of Tucson, Arizona (formerly Sierra Vista, Arizona); Eric Anthony Parra, DOB 12/11/80, of Sierra Vista, Arizona ; Francisco Javier Ramirez-Cuevas, DOB 10/14/55, of Hereford, Arizona; Gregory Lee Lainhart, DOB 9/30/60, of Sierra Vista, Arizona; Charles Steven Cunningham, DOB

(MORE)

8/8/75 of Sierra Vista, Arizona; Francisco Javier Ramirez-Ponce, DOB 5/19/81, of Hereford, Arizona; Victor Gabriel Alvarez-Ruiz, DOB 6/26/71, of Hereford, Arizona; Mitchell Lundell Epherson, DOB 11/27/74, of Tucson, Arizona (formerly of Sierra Vista, Arizona); Chrissy Christina Robbins, DOB 1/30/77, of Modesto, California (formerly of Sierra Vista, Arizona); Robert Cortez Sparkman, DOB 3/31/73, of Tucson, Arizona; William Terry Biggers, DOB 12/23/66, of Tucson, Arizona; William Laroy Davis, DOB 2/22/71 of Sierra Vista, Arizona; David Allan Roberts, Jr., DOB 8/24/68, of Sierra Vista, Arizona; Shandra Lynn Ward, DOB 6/5/71, of Sierra Vista, Arizona; Nalonie Ann Brown, DOB 9/5/69, of Sierra Vista, Arizona; Deborah Ageton, DOB 10/29/54, of Sierra Vista, Arizona; Jonathan Matthew Cunningham, DOB 4/31/66, of Sierra Vista, Arizona; Robert Allen Phillips, DOB 3/19/67, of Sierra Vista, Arizona; Matthew Joseph Lasota, DOB 10/20/77, of Sierra Vista, Arizona; Michael Anthony Gleave, Jr., 11/29/79, of Sierra Vista, Arizona; Christopher Steven Nelson, DOB 3/28/75, of Sierra Vista, Arizona; and Todd Leo Thomas, DOB 7/1/64, of Hereford, Arizona.

The investigation revealed that the organization took care to go to different rental depots in and around the Sierra Vista area to rent the U-Haul, Penske and Ryder trucks, so as to avoid suspicion by the legitimate business owners. The drivers of the rental trucks, although not military members, wore military fatigues so as to avoid suspicion when traveling through the Border Patrol checkpoint on Highway 92, near Benson, Arizona, on their way to Tucson, Casa Grande and Phoenix. On each trip they were able to transport in excess of one ton of marijuana.

The investigation also revealed that Bed Mart and Sam Levitz companies had no knowledge of, or involvement in, the illegitimate activities of their drivers. The indicted drivers made legitimate furniture deliveries in the Sierra Vista area, and then picked up over a ton of marijuana on each trip and transported it back to Tucson in the empty delivery truck; dropping the marijuana off at a stash location before returning the empty truck to their employers.

(MORE)

The federal indictment charges all of the defendants with violating Title 21 of the United States Code, Sections 846, 841(a)(1) and (b)(1), Conspiracy to Possess with Intent to Distribute 1,000 kilograms or more of marijuana. A conviction for this offense carries a maximum penalty of life imprisonment, a \$4 million fine, or both.

The indictment also charges Rueben Dario Arce and Shandra Lynn Ward with violations of Title 21 of the United States Code, Section 861(a)(1), Employment or Use of a Minor in a Controlled Substance Offense. A conviction for this offense carries a maximum penalty of life imprisonment, a \$4 million fine, or both.

Additionally, the indictment charges all defendants except Robert Cortez Sparkman and William Terry Biggers with various violations of Title 21 of the United States Code, Section 841(a)(1), possession with intent to distribute marijuana which carries a maximum penalty of either 20 years, 40 years or life imprisonment, depending upon the amount of marijuana alleged in each individual charge. Each also carries with it a maximum fine of \$1 million, \$2 million or \$4 million, again depending upon the amount of marijuana alleged in each individual charge.

An indictment is simply the method by which a person is charged with criminal activity and raises no inference of guilt. An individual is presumed innocent until competent evidence is presented to a jury that establishes guilt beyond a reasonable doubt.

Today, OCDETF Task Force agents arrested Deborah Ageton, Victor Gabriel Alvarez-Ruiz, Ruben Dareo Arce, Charles Steven Cunningham, Jonathan Matthew Cunningham, William Laroy Davis, Mitchell Lundell Epherson, Michael Anthony Gleave, Jr., Matthew Joseph Lasota, Christopher Steven Nelson, Eric Anthony Parra, Francisco Javier Ramirez-Cuevas, David Allan Roberts, Jr., Robert Cortez Sparkman, Todd Leo Thomas.

(MORE)

The OCDETF Task Force that investigated this case was led by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (formerly United States Customs), the Drug Enforcement Administration, and the Arizona Department of Public Safety, with assistance from the Border Alliance Group (BAG), the Southern Arizona Border Initiative (SABI), the Metropolitan Area Narcotics Trafficking Interdiction Squad (MANTIS), Bureau of Customs and Border Protection (formerly Border Patrol), Cochise County Sheriff, Sierra Vista Police Department, Pima County Sheriff, and the Tucson Police Department.

The prosecution is being handled by Mary Sue Feldmeier, Assistant United States Attorney, District of Arizona, Tucson, Arizona.

CASE NUMBER: CR-03-1375-TUC-RCC (NFF)  
RELEASE NUMBER: 2003-125

# # #